

A STAGE CAT

By
ANNA ALICE CHAPIN

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IT was no secret among us that Gussie James was in love with the leading man, Dorrance MacGregor. Not only would our perceptive faculties have been disgraced forever if we had failed to note the fact, but Gus herself would have died of chagrin.

Not that Gus—or Augusta—was not a good sort. She was. Dare to insinuate anything off-color about her, and you would find yourself beset not only by her running-mate, Bird Laffin, but by the whole dressing-room.

Nevertheless, not even Bird Laffin, not even Gus herself, made any attempt to deny that she was in love with Dorrance MacGregor. She waited brazenly for him in the wings, and found no shame in appearing five minutes late in the dressing room, after every one else had begun to take off their make-up. She

see the first act in toto. Josephine was somewhat a privileged person in the wings, and the stage manager let her stand far down in the first entrance, only stipulating that she wear a dark cloak, so that she would not be seen either by the house or the actors.

Gus, as usual, was hovering in another entrance, darting back and forth, with the nervous movements of a small bird, when MacGregor came on or off. Once in a while Josephine could catch a murmured word from the little extra, usually MacGregor's name, and knew that she was talking to him during the brief waits when he was off. She smiled pityingly, yet cynically, for she was a girl who had lived to the full extent of her twenty-eight years, and neither man nor woman had many illusions for her. Only one thing she still respected loyally, when she found it, and that was love. And the "little James" loved, without doubt; therefore it was that Josephine slipped

Mrs. Harvey snorted.

"Either you're a fool, Mr. MacGregor," she retorted, "or else you don't know the breed!"

MacGregor's mouth hardened suddenly. "Mrs. Harvey," he said, in his quiet, unconcerned English voice, "I have often wished from my heart that I were the brother or the personal friend of one of these young ladies, for the purpose—"

"Well?" said Mrs. Harvey.

"For the purpose, Mrs. Harvey," said MacGregor, adopting the flagrant American methods of warfare at last, "of giving you the worst calling down you ever got in your whole life. It so happens, to my own regret, that I do not know any woman in this company well enough to take up a cudgel in her defence without being impertinent; but I'd earnestly advise you to put up a strong curb on your tongue, for one of these days you might run up against some fellow who, more lucky than myself, has the right to tell you just what he thinks of you!"

Mrs. Harvey departed, flashing promises of future revenge from her cold, little gray eyes.

Just then Josephine Drake stole out from the first entrance. Her eyes were bright with approval as she turned them on MacGregor.

"That was nice of you!" she said, softly. "Awfully nice!"

Gus looked at her with a resentment that stormed to be expressed. This tall, clear-featured girl, who wore tailor-built gowns when she came into the theatre, and never made up for the street—what business had she to creep in here into the stage world and tilt against the rightful denizens thereof? Gus herself was dark and short and plump, and had made up for so many years that she would have felt cold if she had gone out on Broadway without her eyelashes.

Dorrance MacGregor turned quickly, and laughed a little awkwardly.

"Miss Drake!" he exclaimed. "I did not see you before!"

"I was in there," Josephine said, indicating the entrance. "But I could not help hearing your noble defence of—us!"

"Mrs. Harvey gets frightfully on my nerves," laughed MacGregor. "I suppose I really was a bit absurd; but you know she really does sling the girls abominably!" he added, half-apologetically.

They had both forgotten Gus James. She watches them for a few blazing moments, then slips quietly away. In her heart was only room now for a fury of hate and love. How dared this other woman, who did not care—she knew by all the tokens of womanhood that she did not care!—how dared she come between her and the one dear, wonderful dream of her sordid little life? It was not only MacGregor's tone of deference and equality toward the other woman that she resented, not only the fact that on her appearance he had forgotten the existence of her, Gussie—not only, even, that he had shown such exaggerated and shocked amazement to think of her as having been troubled by the insolence of Mrs. Harvey. No, it was a deeper and more cruel hurt than all these—bitter as they might be. The sting was this: Josephine had dared to speak to him as she had never dared; she, the tall, well-dressed outsider, had faced him with the utter frankness of indifference. A moment that meant life, death and the hereafter to Gus, obviously signified nothing to Josephine but a casual interchange of amenities with one of her own kind.

From that moment Gus James lived, breathed and had her being in company with but one thought: the humiliation and punishment of Josephine Drake.

In the company was a breathless, eager youth who chanced to be very much in love with Gus. He was short, pink and plump, but he had an ardent heart, and Gus was very far from discouraging devotion in any quarter; so every evening he used to wait at the foot of the stairs to squeeze her hand excitedly, as she passed up to the dressing-room after the performance.

That night Gus smiled upon him more kindly than usual, and when the crowd of painted and powdered puppets thronged across the stage and on to the ascending steps, she permitted herself to linger a moment, even to be pulled gently back into a shadow while the assistant stage manager was crying "Strike!" and the air was full of the thunder of moving scenery.

When she entered the dressing-room two or three minutes later she looked carefully conscious, and varied it by a well-prepared start and blush when one of the girls asked her where she had been.

"I—I just stopped a moment—to speak to Mr. MacGregor!" she said, with a shade of very becoming embarrassment. "He had something to say to me!"

"Is he going away from here?" chanted Lil.

Josephine said nothing, but in her heart she recognized the lie, and pitied it from her deeper and stronger nature.

As Gus took off her wig, and picked up a big piece of cheesecloth with which to rub off her make-up, she contrived to turn her back squarely upon the rest of the room. As she did so, there was a sudden shout.

"Will you look at her shoulder, please? See Gussie's neck, girls! Gussie, where have you been? Has he got it so badly that he has to kiss you in the wings? Oh, Gus, Gus, Gus!"

For on Gussie's white and well-powdered shoulder, close to the little string of mock pearls which she wore around her throat, was a dab of rouge, unmistakably shaped! It had obviously been placed there by some pair of lips.

In the good-natured hubbub of teasing and questioning which followed, Josephine was silent, for despite the evidence she knew beyond the possibility of a doubt that the general deduction was false.

On the next evening Gus's enmity took a more active turn.

Dorrance MacGregor had brought with him to the theatre a note from his sister to Josephine, asking her to tea on the following afternoon; as she made one of her exits he was waiting for her, and handed her the little envelope with a message of apology from Grace MacGregor for the informal manner of its conveyance. Josephine paused a moment to read the few friendly words on the inclosure, and to send a word of thanks and acceptance to Miss MacGregor.

Gus, making her own exit at about the same moment, saw, and—misunderstood. Her limited brain was incapable of understanding the free-masonry of class, and there was but one interpretation for her to put upon this exchange of notes and friendly phrases. She walked heavily around, behind the back drop, her face flaming under its rouge and pearl powder.

It's a hard thing to tell of Bird Laffin, the next part of the business, for she is a thoroughgoing sport, and has stood by every one of us in turn; but in this, one can only suppose that she was egged on by Gus, and was influenced by her genuine affection for the little woman. Be that as it may, Bird Laffin came up to Josephine, with her most amiable and most casual air, and remarked, in an offhand way: "What's the matter with your fichu? Here, let me see what I can do with it. It's all up in the back. Got a pin, anybody?"

Josephine, rather absent-mindedly, extracted a pin from the front of her gown, and held it up over her shoulder with a vague word of thanks.

She felt a quick touch on her neck, some distance away from the fichu, and instinctively started away and turned to face Bird.

The latter was standing, the pin still in her hand, her face burning, her eyes triumphant; and as Josephine looked at her, wondering, she cried, in a clearly audible voice:

"So he takes them all in turn! To-night it's the great and only Miss Drake that he's been kissing behind the scenes!"

Josephine drew herself up, the scarlet blood that poured into her neck hiding for the moment the dab of rouge upon her neck. But the dab of rouge was there. There were plenty of kind friends to tell her so, and to add: "My dear! How did it ever happen?"

She disdained to wipe it off, and went through the rest of the evening with that crimson smirch upon her slender neck. No matter how high she might hold her head, no matter what cold carelessness she might call up to defend her from derision, there was the dab of rouge—two dabs of rouge, in fact—shaped as a pair of lips are shaped, crimson, betraying, hateful to her pride and modesty as nothing else could have been hateful. For now, at last, the vulgarity of this new life had entered into her existence and hurt her indifferent spirit.

It was all very well to say that it made no difference; that she did not care what such people thought; but when a group of extra men laughed beneath their breath as she passed them, and when she heard a whispered "Dorrie's latest!" ebbing away into silence behind her, she knew that she was not really above the smart of this last attack. She knew down in the recesses of her soul that Gus had won; she was wounded, even though she would not admit it.

When she met Dorrance face to face, it was all that she could do not to let him feel a difference. But

"That's all very well," said Jane Fellowes. "But, dear child, it's the sort of thing that you have to take some notice of."

"Have I?" said Josephine, and raised her head proudly.

"Ah, my dear, my dear!" said Mrs. Fellowes, gently. "Don't bear her too much of a grudge, whoever she is. There's so much evil that arises just from pain. Sometimes I think that all the wrong in the world comes from sorrow run to waste!"

There was a subtle atmosphere of mockery in the dressing-room that night; Josephine was acutely aware of it, and she deliberately lingered over her undressing and redressing, that no one might feel that they had driven her away. Gussie was dressed first. She passed the wash basin where Josephine was busy scrubbing her hands with a nail brush. She, Gus, was trimly dressed for the street, in a bright green gown and a floating veil.

"How quickly you manage to dress," said Josephine, with an effort. "The rest of us are hardly rid of our makeup yet!"

"Oh, that's because you take so much time over your scrubbing up!" said Gus, in the tone of one who was not willing to be gracious, but who felt vastly superior, all the same.

"But one can't go out on the street without 'scrubbing up,'" expostulated Josephine, examining her hands carefully by the light of a swinging electric light.

Gus looked at her sweetly and fastened the last button of her glove.

"Of course, if one has a date, that does make a difference," she murmured. "But I go straight home!"

And with that she made her exit.

For the next week Josephine was never allowed to forget the episode of the dab of rouge. She heard it talked of in the dressing-room, whispered of in the wings downstairs, insinuated in the raised eyebrows of the men of the company. Only Dorrance MacGregor seemed to remain oblivious of the joke—to her abiding relief.

Jane Fellowes it was who took it upon herself to enlighten the unconscious hero of the affair. She went bare-facedly to his dressing-room, and there she unfolded to him such things as she thought it well for him to know.

As a result of this, Dorrance made a point of foregoing his habitual game of bridge in his dressing-room that evening—much to the other bridge fiends' chagrin—and of haunting the wings until he found what Mrs. Fellowes called a "typical group of cats."

Josephine stood near by, looking unutterably uninterested.

Mrs. Fellowes began the campaign.

"Oh, dear, she sighed, with well-simulated discontent, "I wish one didn't have to make up so much in this business! I really think that I could bear it if I didn't have to spend half an hour getting my complexion to look like what it once was, and my lips like what they never could be!"

"You should adopt my method," said MacGregor, carelessly. "I hardly make up at all, you know. A mere dust of flesh-colored powder, a bit of blue paint near my eyes, and the thing's done. I never bother with my lips at all."

There was a little stir. They looked more closely at him than usual. It was true! Not an atom of paint was there to be seen on his thin, clear-cut lips. Mrs. Fellowes smiled with superhuman sweetness as she said: "Dear me, no! So you don't! Do you know, I never noticed it before!"

Gus, scarlet to her ears, turned away, and Bird Laffin followed her. Then MacGregor deliberately walked over to where Josephine was standing. She had heard every word.

"This is an execrable business that we're in!" he



"HOLD ON THERE," HE REMARKED, PLEASANTLY.

was eager to accept opportunities, legitimate or otherwise, for going downstairs before her call.

She even accepted the innuendoes of the dressing-room—which, as all women know, are the broadest and roughest in the world—with a certain pride. It was as though she hoped against hope that some foundation for the blatant rumors that she faced would suddenly arise to justify and discount all that she had suffered both from envious and too truthful lips.

As a matter of fact—and here lies the pitiful part of the story—Dorrance MacGregor noticed the little dark James woman barely more than he did the other extra ladies. Nevertheless, he, being by some odd and rather tragic fatality a gentleman, was painstakingly courteous to her at all times, marvelling a trifle at her devotion, but utterly unconscious of her love.

Now it came to pass that on one direly unfortunate night a certain young woman entered the company who did not by rights, as the saying goes, belong to it. Her health had broken down, and an old predilection for the stage had induced her family and her physician to suggest a trial trip in this company as a means of distracting and quieting her nerves. Also, she knew the star, who was particularly keen on getting her into the show, with a view to possible newspaper reports later.

It further came to pass that the new young woman, whose name—not that it is important—was Josephine Drake, had known Dorrance MacGregor in various drawing rooms and at several dinner tables. When she caught sight of him one night she made her way to his side, all oblivious of disapproving looks, and greeted the red coat and ruffles with the same polite pleasure that she had been accustomed to show the black coat when she had met it and its owner in her friends' houses.

Dorrance MacGregor was delighted to see her; not so much for herself, for he was a long way from being even partially in love with her, but for what she represented—the world of well-gowned women and decent fellows to which he was grateful to think that he still belonged.

It happened that both Josephine and Gus were down on the floor a bit early one night; Gus to watch MacGregor's first entrance, as usual, and Josephine to

farther out of sight in her narrow hiding place, and smiled a bit sadly as she caught the subdued tone of MacGregor's well-bred voice answering Gus's eager advances.

It was at this time that Mrs. Harvey, then our wardrobe mistress, came bustling by, with a new scarf recently demanded by Miss Bridge. Mrs. Harvey was a harsh-tongued, underbred English woman.

As a rule, the wardrobe mistress contented herself with a sharp order to "Hold up your skirt! Do you think the management can afford to buy new costumes twice a week for the likes of you?" whenever she met with a humble extra, who might chance to be hurrying to get a drink of water, or slipping unobtrusively into some corner to wait for her cue.

But to-night Mrs. Harvey's doll must have been stuffed with peculiarly rasping sawdust, for she was in the mood for general and special abuse.

She stopped in front of Gus and looked her over from head to foot.

"What are you doing, dressed and made up, at this hour?" she demanded, with the invariable insolence of the vulgar woman wearing her little brief authority unbecomingly.

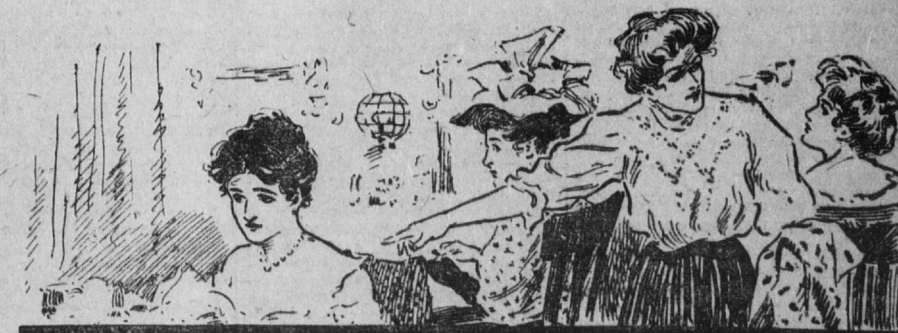
Gus winced. "I suppose I can dress when I like, can't I?" she said, with what she considered quite a grand air.

"Funny you should care to get your things on half an hour or so ahead of time," proceeded the wardrobe mistress acidly. "Why, Miss Bridge herself has hardly begun to make up yet!"

"Well, you've no objection, I guess," said Gus, writhing, but immensely superior.

"I've an objection to your dragging that silk skirt all over this dirty floor," snapped Mrs. Harvey, bound to vent her ill temper in some direction. "You fool, I should think from all I've heard that you were old enough to know better, but I'd just like to tell you that the sort of girl who goes chasing around with leading men—"

"Hold on, there," remarked Dorrance MacGregor, pleasantly. He had stood about all he could. "You really must give me a chance to defend myself, Mrs. Harvey! We are not all quite so disreputable that a woman's reputation is ruined by speaking to us!"



"WILL YOU LOOK AT HER SHOULDER, PLEASE?"

she was too just for that. She smiled and nodded cheerily, as she said good-night.

"See you to-morrow," he called gaily, as he hurried to his dressing-room.

Josephine went slowly upstairs, acutely conscious of the red patch on her neck. As she ascended the stairs, Mrs. Fellowes, one of the older women, and what we all termed a "dear," stopped her resolutely.

"My dear," she said, "tell me frankly: Did not that Laffin girl put that dab on your shoulder?"

"I'd rather not say anything about it," answered Josephine.

muttered. "Will you come and have tea with Grace to-morrow?"

She nodded silently; and when she passed Gus, standing in a huddled attitude in a dark corner, she forebore to look at her.

"Oh, please," whispered the young and ardent extra man, approaching Gus's motionless figure, "mayn't I take you and Miss Laffin out for supper, after the show?"

"Oh, I guess so," said Gus, indifferently. She was staring straight in front of her, and there was a look in her eyes that the boy could not understand.

Next Week, **GOSSAMER THREADS** By **BROUGHTON BRANDENBURG**